Some Long Thoughts on Early Cycladic Sculpture

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For Dolly Goulandris

The opening of the Robert and Renée Belfer Court in May 1995 brought to fruition the first phase of the reinstallation of the Greek and Roman collections at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Devoted to Greek art from the Neolithic through the Archaic periods, the Belfer Court presents selections from the department's ample and varied holdings, which document the artistic and cultural evolution from approximately 4500 B.C. to 480 B.C. The installation process afforded an opportunity to reconsider the material from various perspectives. In the present article, I propose to focus attention upon works of art that were made in the Cycladic Islands during the Late and Final Neolithic periods (ca. 5300–3200 B.C.) and the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3200–2200 B.C.).

The points to be addressed—some general, some specific—revolve around the question of continuity. Within the last twenty-five years, the increase in archaeological evidence owing to excavation and the introduction of new lines of investigation have had a considerable impact upon the study of Greek culture before about 1000 B.C. Perhaps the greatest single advance has been the recognition of the degree of interconnection that existed between sites and cultures during chronologically remote periods. In particular, the "Dark Ages," which were believed to represent a period of total desolation between the demise of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations about 1200 B.C. and the rebirth of socially organized existence between about 1000 and 900 B.C., are now acquiring a quite different aspect. There is evidence for significant, active communities, of which Lefkandi on Euboea is the best known,[1] and for intensive contact driven by settlement and trade with centers in the eastern Mediterranean, such as Cyprus.[2] Because the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, whose composition is generally dated to the eighth century B.C., recount events that took place during and after the Trojan War, conventionally placed in the twelfth century B.C., these works remain invaluable written sources that span the prehistoric and the beginning of the historical era.[3]

The picture that is now emerging of the Greek world and the eastern Mediterranean is one of extraordinary complexity and unexpected cohesion. The present juncture is conducive indeed to considering appropriate topics from a broad perspective. Such an approach is all the more desirable in view of the fact that from at least 5000 B.C. on, there has been continual habitation of the Greek mainland and the major islands. From time to time, therefore, it is useful to lift a body of material from its most restricted, immediate context and to survey possible points of contact within the larger Greek developmental continuum. I have two specific concerns here: to recognize the evolution of marble sculpture in the Cyclades as one coherent process from the Neolithic period to the end of the Early Bronze Age (known in the Cyclades as the Early Cycladic period) and to isolate some features of Early Cycladic culture that have parallels in the Geometric period (ca. 1000–700 B.C.). Among the scholars of Early Cycladic sculpture and its antecedents, Saul S. Weinberg was distinguished by his particularly broad and deep field of vision. Many of the ideas presented here depend upon, and proceed from, his fundamental study "Neolithic Figurines and Aegean Interrelations," published in 1951.[4]

Situated in the Aegean Sea, in the generally circular conformation that gives them their name, the Cycladic Islands were first populated in antiquity considerably later than other parts of what we know as the Greek world.[5] Although there are traces of habitation in Thessaly, southern Greece, and Crete during the Early Neolithic period (seventh millennium B.C.), the Cyclades were evidently not settled until the Late Neolithic period (late sixth millenium B.C.). The earliest known settlement has been discovered on Saliagos, now a very small island near Paros but at that time part of an isthmus linking Paros and Antiparos. Saliagos produced, among other finds, a marble figure

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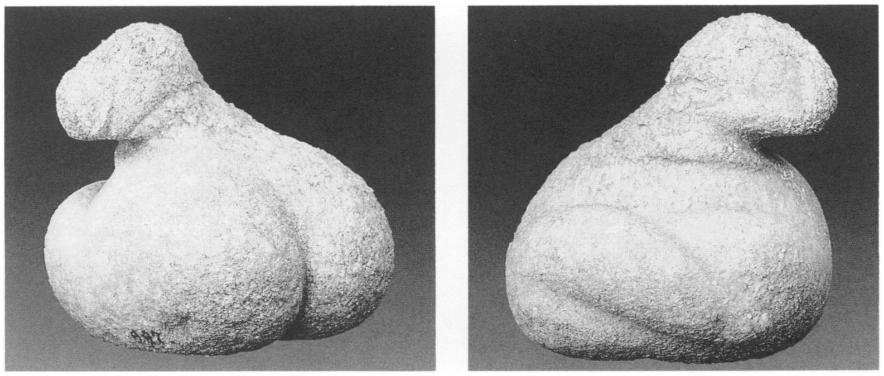

Figure 1. Steatopygous female figure, Cycladic, Neolithic, ca. 5300–4500 B.C. H. 5.9 cm. Paros Museum 887 (photo: Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture in Greece*, p. 319, no. 240)

of a fat woman, seated with her left leg slung over the right;[6] the exceedingly pronounced thighs and buttocks characterize a condition known as steatopygy and underlie the conventional interpretation of such objects as being associated with fertility (Figure 1). The work is dated between about 5300 and 4500 B.C.

As the quantity of evidence for human activity in the Cyclades during the later phases of the Neolithic period gradually increases, certain features of the time become clear. Given the barrenness of these rocky outcroppings, the inhabitants derived their livelihood from the sea and from indigenous resources, most notably obsidian, a volcanic glass of which the chief Aegean source is Melos; obsidian was used to make

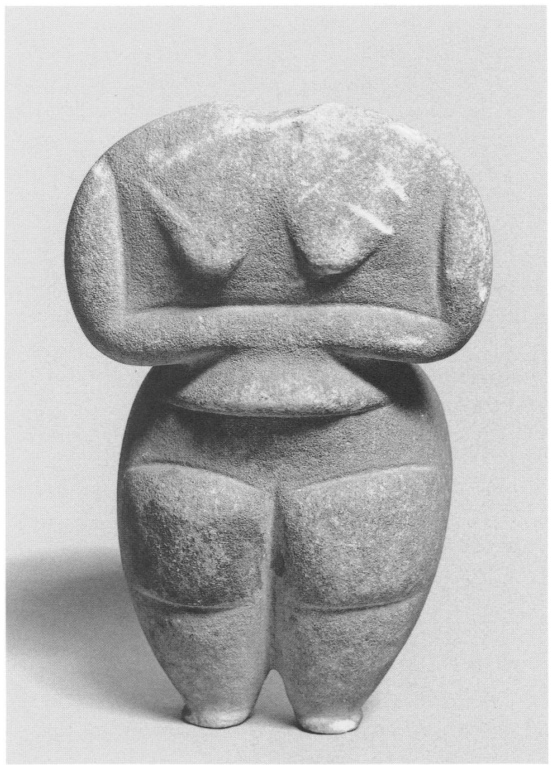

Figure 2. Steatopygous female figure, Cycladic, Neolithic, ca. 5000–3500 B.C. H. 21.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971, 1972.118.104

Figure 3. Steatopygous female figure, Cycladic, Neolithic, ca. 5000–3500 B.C. H. 20.5 cm. The Collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy (photo: Sarah Wells)

tools and, as early as the Upper Paleolithic period (before ca. 8000 B.C.), had been brought to the Greek mainland as far north as Macedonia.[7] The significance of obsidian lies in the proof that it provides for intensive exploitation and extensive diffusion around the Aegean world from earliest times.

Another resource abundant on many Cycladic islands is marble. The steatopygous lady from Saliagos demonstrates absolute mastery of the material and of the human figure, as does her contemporary with a tighter silhouette found on Naxos.[8] Several other Neolithic figures of the same type, while lacking in secure provenances, are believed to come from the Cyclades as well.[9] Foremost among them are the examples in Brussels, said to be from Amorgos,[10] and in Oxford, reportedly from Naxos.[11] The pieces in The Metropolitan Museum of Art[12] (Figure 2) and in the collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy[13] (Figure 3) are associated with either the Cyclades or Attica; the discovery of steatopygous ladies on Aegina[14] and in the area of Athens,[15] as well as the results of John Coleman's excavations at Kephala on Keos,[16] belong to the body of evidence for connections between parts of the Cyclades and central Greece.[17] The appearance of accomplished marble figures rendered naturalistically—and no doubt appropriately to their function—at the time when the Cyclades were beginning to be inhabited speaks for the cultural level of the inhabitants, both technically and conceptually. The objection might be raised that the knowledge of marble working, or possibly even the objects themselves, were brought by the settlers, who presumably arrived from the east. Similarities between the Cycladic steatopygous ladies and those from Macedonia, Thrace, Thessaly, and Crete made of both stone and clay militate against this argument. Moreover, the extraordinarily skillful knapping of the obsidian cores into blades and the use of local stone for houses and tombs as well as utensils, pendants, and other small objects indicate that the islanders quickly adapted whatever skills they may have brought to local conditions and resources.

The early marble figures from the Cyclades consist not only of the "voluptuous" type but also of very simple, schematic pieces. Major, recurrent varieties have been categorized as "yarn-winders [*Garnwicklern*]," "spade-shaped," and "violin-shaped."[18] A marble example from Saliagos represents the violin form (Figure 4), while others from the site seem to be summarily worked beach pebbles.[19] The contemporaneity of naturalistic and schematic representations is critically important: given the total absence of written records, and the scarcity and difficulty of other forms of evidence, stylistic criteria figure prominently in establishing relative and absolute chronologies. Since progression from "abstract" to "realistic" is a staple of art-historical taxonomy, often with chronological implications, it is invaluable that Neolithic Saliagos has produced both types.

The transition from the Neolithic period to the Early Bronze Age was an evolutionary process.[20] Evidence is only slowly accumulating for sites in the Cyclades that continued from one era to the next;[21] a hallmark of the Early Bronze Age is the burgeoning of settlements with distinctive cultural assemblages that also permit chronological determinations.[22] The earlier phases of the Early Cycladic period—Early Cycladic I and II—are also known as the Grotta-Pelos culture, after two typesites, while the mature phase of Early Cycladic II is associated with the Keros-Syros culture. This period, about 3200 to 2200 B.C., saw the flowering of Cycladic marble sculpture, the profusion of figures as well as of vessels.

The study and classification of Cycladic figures began in the 1880s, when British and German traveler-scholars undertook the first visits and excavations that yielded prehistoric objects. Momentum increased significantly as the twentieth century progressed; archaeological activity enormously augmented the available material, which in turn prompted ever more refined analyses of the sculptural varieties, the identification of individual artists, and other specialized studies.[23] The greatest contributions in these specific areas have been made by Saul Weinberg, Jürgen Thimme, Colin Renfrew, and Pat Getz-Gentle (formerly known as Pat Getz-Preziosi).

The developmental pattern for Cycladic figures, which Pat Getz-Gentle's much-reproduced chart encapsulates

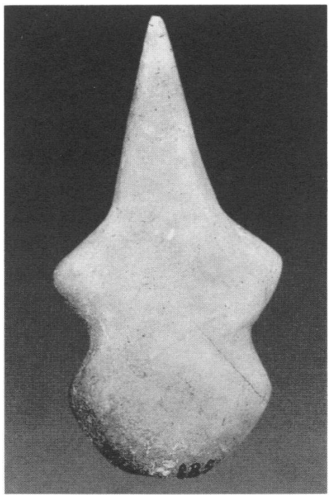

Figure 4. Schematic figure, Cycladic, Neolithic, ca. 5300–4500 B.C. H. 6.6 cm. Paros Museum 885 (photo: Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture in Greece*, p. 320, no. 242)

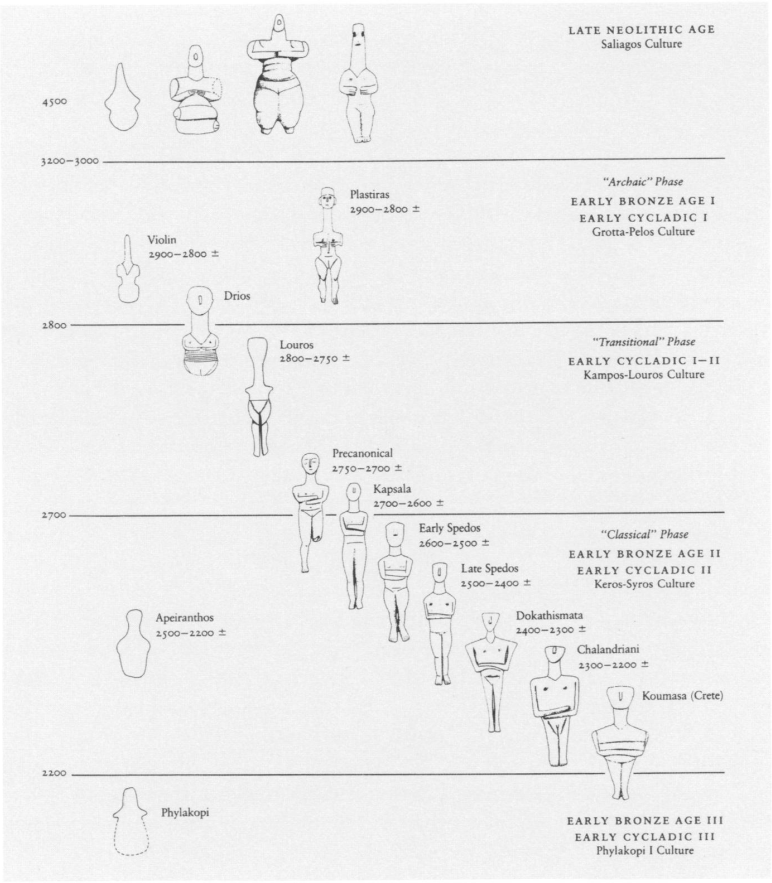

Figure 5. Chart showing the major types of female figure in Cycladic art and their chronological relation. (Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades: Individual and Tradition in the Third Millennium B.C.* [Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, copyright The University of Michigan, 1987] p. 8, fig. 3)

in simplified form (Figure 5), provides for the contemporaneity of stylized and naturalistic types. The general tendency within the latter category is toward schematization, even an academic mannerism. Two figures in the Metropolitan Museum's collection may be singled out as illustrations. Probably the most important and most discussed work is the representation of a seated man playing a harplike instrument (Figure 6). Acquired in 1947, before Cycladic art became ubiquitously fashionable, it was doubted in various quarters because its many naturalistic features made it difficult to categorize and date. The musculature of the upper arms, the wristbones and fingernails, and the swelling calves, as well as the articulation of the instrument with its duck's-bill finial[24] and of the high-backed chair, suggested an advanced date, but there was no context into which it readily fitted. Progress on two fronts in the study of this material contributed decisively to the acceptance of the sculpture today. Investigation of the use of polychromy has established that such details as eyes, mouths, hair, and headdresses were often added in paint; where paint has disappeared, areas of discoloration or very low relief known as ghosts document its original presence. Remains of pigment on the eyes and mouth of the harp player and the ghost at the top of the head are refinements unknown to forgers in the 1940s. A second, particularly significant advance was the observation by Jürgen Thimme that the work was earlier than the other preserved musicians.[25] It could therefore be recognized as a starting point in a process of progressive stylization rather than as a terminus in a process of progressive naturalism.

A paradigm of the consummate but also precarious stylization attained by Cycladic sculptors at their height is the name piece of the Bastis Master, given to the Museum by Christos G. Bastis in 1968 (Figure 7).[26] The work displays a breathtaking balance between the articulation of the various parts of the body and the elongated, slender whole into which they have been

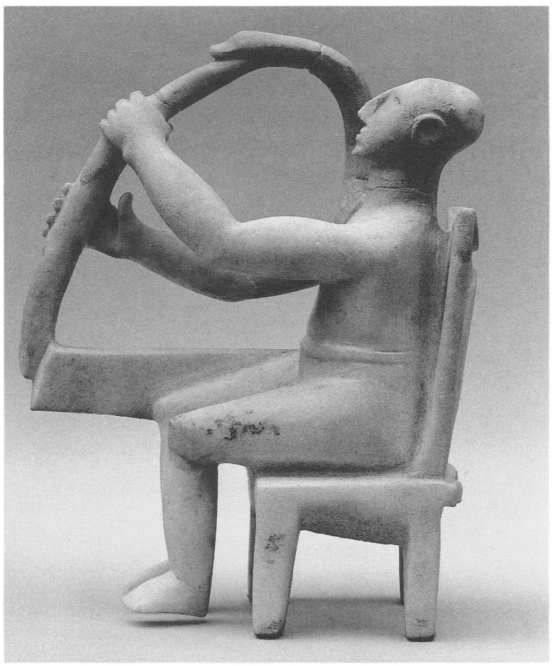

Figure 6. Seated harp player, Cycladic, Early Cycladic I-II, ca. 2800–2700 B.C. H. 29.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1947, 47.100.1

Figure 7. Female figure, Cycladic, Early Cycladic II, ca. 2600–2400 B.C. H. 63.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Christos G. Bastis, 1968, 68.148

composed. The choreography of curved surfaces in the head, the restrained swelling of the breasts and abdomen, and the downward-pointing toes with slightly convex soles represent exceptional technical command. The great beauty of this work of art lies in its simplicity, a mature rather than a primitive simplicity. During the Early Cycladic II period, when the Bastis figure was made, several types existed concurrently; they tend to be named after sites at which they were found.[27] The Bastis piece represents the Spedos variety, another the Dokathismata variety (Figure 8), a third the Chalandriani variety (Figure 9). What is evident in these works is the stylization, the amount of art, that informs them.

The inclusion of the Neolithic evidence as an integral part of the Cycladic continuum expands and defines the framework for the developments of the Early Cycladic period. The fundamental innovations of the Neolithic age in Greece were the establishment of permanent habitations, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Wherever these mainstays of civilization occur, there are also human and animal figures formed in the local material of choice. Since the Cyclades were populated rather late, their figures appear correspondingly late. In northern Greece and Crete, by contrast, representations exist from the Early Neolithic period on (seventh millennium B.C.).[28] The artistic achievements in the Cyclades are of special interest, however, because of the use of marble, the Greek artistic medium par excellence, and because both chronologically and geographically these achievements are part of an extraordinary cultural continuum spanning the Bronze Age and the first millennium B.C.

Scholars have traditionally viewed Cycladic sculpture as a rather self-contained phenomenon and espoused an evolutionary sequence from the more "primitive" to the more naturalistic that was chronologically confined to the Early Bronze Age.[29] Today we have the benefit of knowing that the two types existed concurrently as early as the settlement on Saliagos. Moreover,

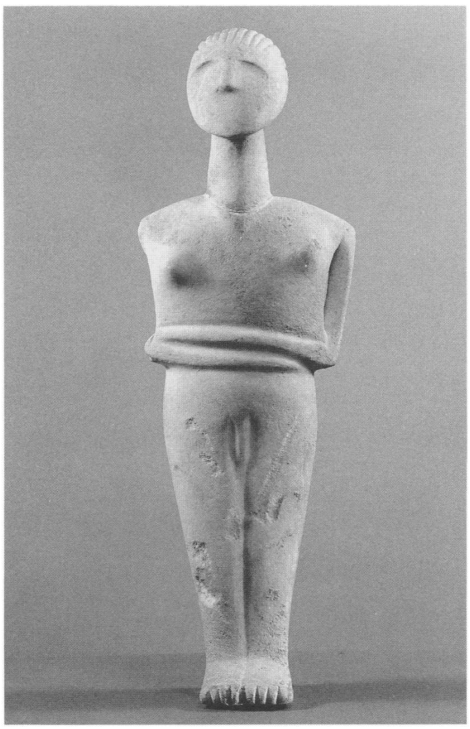

Figure 8. Male figure, Cycladic, Early Cycladic II, ca. 2400–2300 B.C. H. 35.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971, 1972.118.103

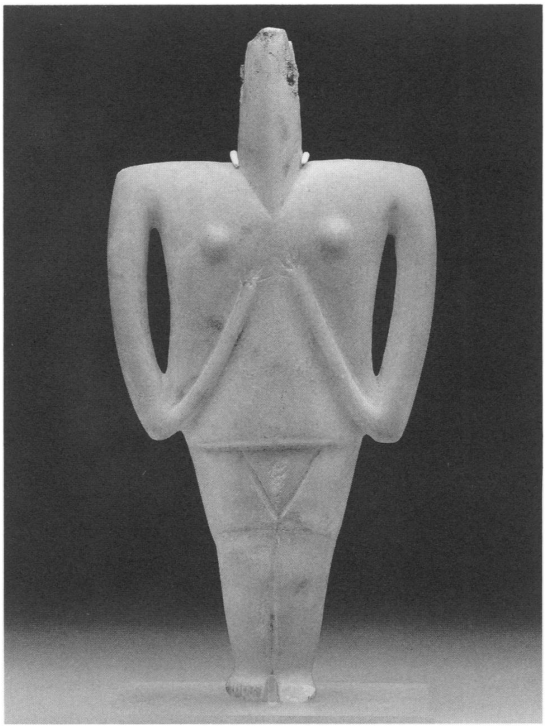

Figure 9. Female figure, Cycladic, Early Cycladic II, ca. 2300–2200 B.C. H. 27.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Alice K. Bache, 1977, 1977.187.11

Figure 10. Group of three figures, animal, and bowl, Aegean, Neolithic, ca. 5000–3500 B.C. H. of figure with single child 13.3 cm. The Collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy (photo: Otto E. Nelson)

Figure 11. Female figure with a smaller one on her head, Cycladic, Early Cycladic II, ca. 2700–2600 B.C. H. 46.6 cm. The Collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy (photo: Sarah Wells)

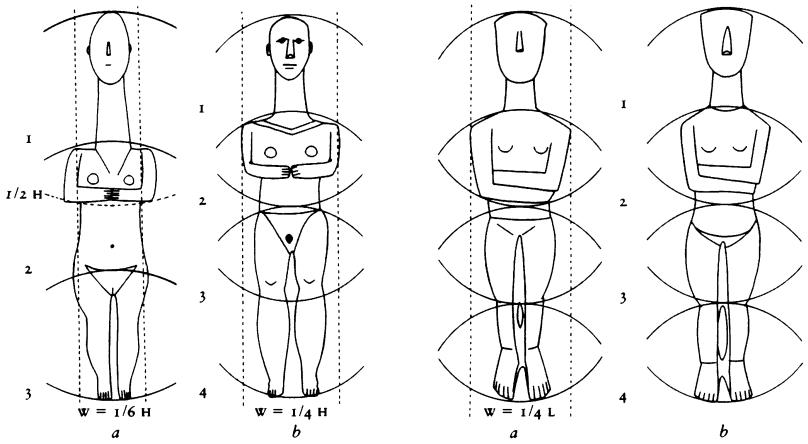

Figure 12. Diagrams illustrating the design of Early Cycladic figures. (Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, p. 37, fig. 15)

the major tendency over the roughly three millennia from the Neolithic to Early Cycladic II/III seems to have been from greater naturalism to greater stylization. Two works in the collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy make this point compellingly.

The first sculpture (Figure 10, far right) belongs to an exceptional Neolithic group[30] that was probably found on the eastern coast of Attica or on Euboea just opposite, thus on a western extension of the Cycladic cultural sphere. A person of indeterminate sex squats down, arms held close to the sides of the body, hands at the knees.[31] There are no specific attributes to indicate the sex nor is there a general feature such as steatopygy. The figure is characterized as withered, through the boniness of the face and the serrated dewlap under the chin. Holding onto his or her back is a child, also of indeterminate sex. The remaining constituents of the group are a seated individual with two small children on its back, a seated steatopygous female, a quadruped, and a bowl. Although the adult with child raises more questions than it answers, we have no difficulty recognizing and describing each member of the duo, a feature that it shares with the other "naturalistic" Neolithic works.

Compare a very rare Cycladic composition[32] that occurs during Early Cycladic II and consists of a larger female figure supporting a smaller variant of herself on her head. In the Levy-White example (Figure 11), which Getz-Gentle considers transitional between Early Cycladic I and II, the larger figure is pregnant, the smaller is not. Here virtually every physical element has been conceptualized. We have no idea whether the smaller form represents the future—the child, possibly the idea of a child—or the past, preceding generations. While both the Neolithic and Early Cycladic groups evidently have to do with fertility, the placement of the child where it can neither be held nor seen by the adult is unusual; the more obvious mother-and-child combination is best known in the Neolithic iconographic repertoire from a terracotta figure

found in Thessaly.[33] The complex composition represented by the two Levy-White pieces (Figures 10, 11) is one of several for which there are both Neolithic and Early Cycladic examples. Another consists of two figures side by side with the arm of one around the shoulder of the other.[34] The two Levy-White groups make particularly evident the shift in emphasis from palpable description in the earlier works to evocation in the later ones. The concomitant question is whether connections may be drawn between types separated by significant chronological and geographic intervals.

Evolution requires continuity. The developments that we have been considering presuppose certain constants. Some are sure, such as the availability of marble and the abrasive materials (pumice, emery, sand, obsidian) with which the stone was worked. Other constants can exist only as plausible working hypotheses, for example, the notion that the steatopygous lady from Saliagos fulfilled roughly the same need or intention as the figure by the Bastis Master. The demands that can be made upon the notion of continuity are considerably more vulnerable when one proposes to make connections between the prehistoric period of the Bronze Age and the Geometric period, which is conventionally dated between about 1000 and 700 B.C. Not only is the time span very long, but it was also punctuated by major upheavals, such as population movements and the virtual cessation of organized, civilized life on most of the Greek mainland, Crete, and many other islands between about 1150 and 1000 B.C. These very considerable obstacles notwithstanding, there are features of the Bronze Age that have counterparts in the early first millennium. I propose to discuss two that are rooted in Early Cycladic art. The virtually complete omission of Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece from the discussion that follows can justly be considered a major one; however, just as there are connections, based on evident geographical grounds, between the Cyclades, Euboea, and the immediately adjacent regions of Central Greece, so the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures represent a distinct and extremely complex continuum.[35] Their inclusion to any significant degree would completely change the purpose and scope of our consideration.

The characterization that we have presented of Early Cycladic sculpture as the culmination of a process of artistic refinement depends not only on stylistic criteria but also on a technical phenomenon. One of Pat Getz-Gentle's most far-reaching contributions is the discovery that Cycladic figures were evidently designed according to simple geometric principles and proportions that could be marked on a piece of marble with a compass, a straightedge, and some charcoal or an obsidian flake (Figure 12).[36] In her discussions of individual artistic personalities, she has shown that the use of proportional formulas was an established practice, representing one of the criteria by which a hand may be recognized. The systematization of artistic creation through mathematical formulas speaks for a process that is more intellectual than spontaneous, that runs the risk of becoming mechanical, and that is quite in keeping with the thoroughly conceptual character of the Levy-White "double-decker." While Getz-Gentle is careful to emphasize that not every preserved figure was made according to a proportional canon and that the preserved material exhibits considerable differences in quality, she has demonstrated convincingly the applicability of a mathematical formula not only to individual figures depicted full length but also to those assuming more complex postures, such as the harp players or the groups of two or three figures. These procedures seem to have been used throughout the Early Cycladic period.

There is no other phase of prehistoric Greek art in which scholarship has discerned an equally significant degree of artistic and mathematical conjunction. This combination makes a very prominent reappearance, however, in the art that began to take shape about 1000 B.C., especially in Attica, and is called Geometric. Geometric art is most fully represented by terracotta vases and bronze statuettes and such accoutrements as fibulae (safety pins). The style derives its name from the circles, triangles, and other basic forms that constitute most of the ornament, as well as the parts out of which the figures are composed. As documented by the abundant and varied sequence from Athens, the maturation of the Geometric style can be followed from the first elegant, severe vases decorated exclusively with geometric motifs through those that reveal the progressive introduction of animals and then humans to the great achievements of the eighth century B.C., which are marvels of balance and complexity.[37]

The appropriateness of the word *geometric* to these works of art is evident on many levels. A short look at one of the Museum's monumental funerary vases shows, in equal measure, the limited range of forms that underlies all aspects of the decoration and the remarkable inventiveness with which they are used (Figure 13). For instance, the upper bodies of the mourners flanking the deceased are formed of rectangles and triangles, while those of the warriors below are melded with their shields, which are modified circles. Geometry very likely played a role as well in the accommodation of the decoration to the body of the vase, which is itself a large circle. The distribution of the

Figure 13. Funerary krater, Attic, Geometric, 2nd half of the 8th century B.C. H. 108.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914, 14.130.14

Figure 14. Horse, Greek, Geometric, 2nd half of the 8th century B.C. H. 8.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the H. L. Bache Foundation, 1969, 69.61.4

various motifs around the circumference required forethought, remarkable skill, and, undoubtedly, facility with a compass.

On a more fundamental level, perhaps the single most important feature of such Geometric works is the harmonious interplay between structure and mass. This is a leitmotif that runs throughout Greek art, but during its Geometric phase the ingredients are particularly apparent. The clarity and distinctness with which everything is depicted give this art an analytical, bare-bones character. For example, the shroud that in reality would have covered the dead is raised and regularized so that every particular of the prothesis—the laying out of the body—can be depicted. The construction of the figures out of thin, angular arms, triangular torsos, and rather sinuously articulated legs effectively conveys the combination of hard skeleton and softer musculature and flesh that makes up a human form. The figures also demonstrate how fine a line exists between the abstraction of a triangle and the corporeality of a torso.

The observations that we have made about a vase are also applicable to contemporaneous, fully three-dimensional bronze sculptures. While lacking in verisimilitude, a horse (Figure 14) is instantly recognizable and conveys very directly the power and elegance of its subject. Worthy of note too is that these figures stand on bases that define their terrain not only in spatial terms but also through the decoration, most often of patterns pierced through the metal.

I should like to propose that there are similarities between the ways in which the Early Cycladic artist and the Geometric artist approached their work. If indeed mathematical calculation figured in the process of design and execution, I do not wish to suggest that it occurred only in these two contexts. The latter provide a good deal of evidence, a point of departure, however, and furnish an incentive for identifying comparable

Figure 15. Pair of seated harp players and vase on a support, Cycladic, Early Cycladic II, ca. 2700–2600 B.C. H. 19.8 cm, 17.2 cm. The Collection of Shelby White and Leon Levy (photo: Otto E. Nelson)

modes of work in other periods and materials of artistic endeavor during the Bronze Age in Greece; architecture suggests itself immediately as an obvious area of investigation, glyptics as well. It is, moreover, not my intention to imply here that any direct connection exists between the Early Cycladic and the Geometric artist. The point is to define the question and launch it upon the sea of inquiry.

Our considerations of Early Cycladic sculpture have so far concentrated on matters of development, style, and execution. The realm of iconography also offers abundant possibilities for investigation. I should like to pursue several aspects of the seated harp players.[38] The subject is fraught with difficulty, because it is inseparable from every controversy that concerns Homer and epic poetry; one dares to venture into this terrain, nonetheless, because it is central to every aspect of Greek culture.

The eight or so Early Cycladic harp players that survive form part of the larger category of male figures;[39] although the males represent a variety of special types, such as warriors, they are considerably outnumbered by the female figures. The harp players were probably made over a period of about two centuries as the exceptional achievements of artists who otherwise produced the female statuettes.[40] Five of the preserved harpists belong to a pair: those in the Levy-White collection[41] (Figure 15), those from Thera now in Karlsruhe,[42] and one that was found with a double-pipe player on Keros.[43] The occurrence of harp players in groups of two raises the question of whether and how they performed together and, in the process, leads to a reconsideration of the harpists found singly.

The absence of any contemporaneous circumstantial evidence necessitates a search for applicable parallels. If one believes in the principle of continuity from the Bronze Age into the first millennium, an aggregate of testimony concerning the performance of the Homeric epics provides thought-provoking—and potentially enlightening—information. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are our richest early sources about bards, most notably in the examples of Demodokos and Phemios, as well as their heroic counterparts Odysseus and Achilles.[44] Diogenes Laertius[45] records that Solon passed a law requiring rhapsodes to perform the poems of Homer in relays, with one taking over where another had stopped. In the "Hipparchos," whose authorship by Plato is disputed, the tyrant reportedly required rhapsodes to perform the Homeric epics in order and in relays. Gregory Nagy similarly interprets a significant passage in the *Iliad*;[46] Achilles in his tent is playing his lyre, "beautifully wrought and with a silver bridge," singing the glories of men while Patroklos, seated opposite him in silence, waits for the

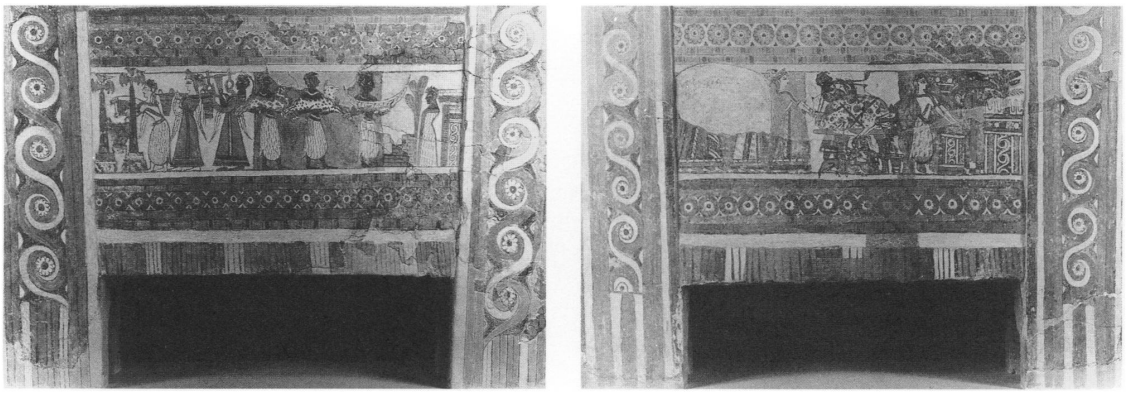

Figure 16. Two panels of the sarcophagus from Haghia Triada, Minoan, Late Minoan III, ca. 1400 B.C. L. 137 cm. Heraklion Museum (photo: Athens, TAP Service)

hero to stop so that he can continue. If Nagy's rendering of the episode is accurate, the practice of "relay recitation" would be attested earlier than the sixth century B.C., when Solon and Hipparchus ruled Athens. The passage opens the possibility that the practice existed at the time of Homer, or of the Trojan War, or perhaps even during preceding eras, when the stories and practices of the oral poet reflected in Homer were formed.

The significance of this literary testimony, and particularly of the passage in the *Iliad*, is that it provides an appropriate point of reference or comparison for the pairs of harp players. Equally important is that it strengthens the possible identifications of these figures beyond their being simply musicians. The pronounced backward tilt of the head in some suggests that they are singing; there is no way, and really no hope, of ever capturing how their song would have sounded. The alternative of recitation places the harp players within the category of poet-performers and also helps to explain why such individuals should be singled out for complex sculptural treatment. In illiterate societies the bard preserved the history and collective memory of a community in his lays. From this perspective, he acquired exceptional status, quite apart from any distinction that he might display as an individual artist. Moreover, it becomes quite understandable that over a period of several centuries such members of a society should be represented in stone, not to say memorialized.

In a welcome exception to the frequent lack of pertinent evidence, representations of lyre players and their instruments appear with some consistency during the Greek Bronze Age after the Early Cycladic period.[47] In the Minoan culture of Crete,[48] there are a number of seals of the Middle Minoan period (ca. 2000–1600 B.C.) engraved with motifs that have been identified as lyres. One of the most celebrated documents of the Late Minoan period, dated about 1400 B.C., is the so-called Haghia Triada sarcophagus, which is made of limestone and decorated with a procession that includes a lyre player and a flute player (Figure 16). This scene and two related ones on wall paintings show musicians in a context quite different from that of performance/recitation.[49] A clay pyxis, or box, dated to the thirteenth century B.C., from western Crete, shows a figure dwarfed by a lyre and accompanied by birds; horns of consecration with double axes suggest a ritual context.[50] The leap to the Geometric period is facilitated by a celebrated bronze in the Heraklion Museum in which a seated man and his lyre are melded into an inseparable unit; he is dated to the eighth century B.C.[51] The comparative material from the Greek mainland is in many respects less rich, and mainly from the Late Bronze Age, the Mycenaean period (ca. 1550–1100 B.C.). The finds do, however, include actual remains of lyres, notably two from Menidi.[52] The palace of Pylos, moreover, included a wall painting of a long-robed musician perched on an extraordinarily gnarled rock and playing an instrument embellished with duck's-head finials; a large white bird levitates before him.[53]

The few examples just cited are intended simply as reminders that harp- or lyre-playing performers are a recurring presence in the Greek world from the Early Bronze Age on.[54] It is evident that they served in a number of capacities. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* bards not only sing of heroic events, but they also accompany the dance or participate in funerary observances.[55] It is most likely that the Early Cycladic musicians used their skills in numerous ways as well. Among the few clues that we have as to what they might be doing is whether they are seated or standing; later literary evidence suggests that a bard was typically seated.[56] In any event, his role of preserving and perpetuating the community's traditions was undoubtedly primary.

While, to my mind, the Cycladic harpists can be seen as remote ancestors of the poet-performers most illustriously represented by Homer, the subject is vexed by the absence of information on critical points. For instance, if the Cycladic figures indeed depict bards, they were singers whose performances rendered the essentials of a narrative but included modifications in each retelling. Most of our ancient literary evidence, however, applies to rhapsodes, professionals who memorized and recited a standardized, written text.[57] The establishment of a canonical text, the ramifications of writing, and the further consequences affecting the performances of originally oral material are among the complicating considerations. An entirely different set of questions concerns such details as the identity of the stringed instruments and the number of strings they had.[58] These matters, however, have to do with the proper integration or definition of the harp players within a long tradition. The major step is for them to be accepted as part of it.

The point of departure for this discussion of Cycladic musicians was the phenomenon of pairs. Before leaving the subject, let us pause over the duo from Keros, which consists of a harp player and a standing man who plays the double pipes. The double-pipe player belongs to a group of at least four standing musicians who play woodwinds but is the only one of the type who is completely preserved; also in the group are one or two syrinx players and two fragmentary figures, the nature of whose instruments cannot be identified.[59]

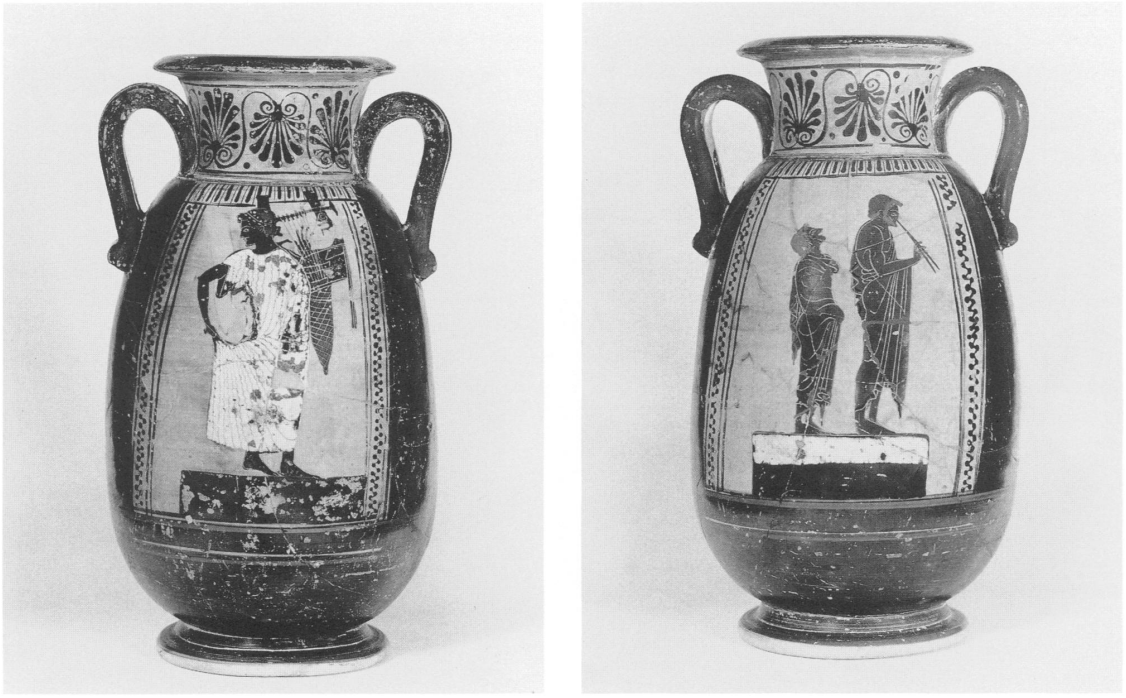

Figure 17. Neck-pelike, Attic, black-figure, ca. 500 B.C. H. 26.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.286.72

The decisive feature of a woodwind player is that he can only accompany poetic recitation; he performs as a soloist purely in a musical capacity. According to ancient sources of the historical period, the aulodes, who sang to strains of the flute, ranked below the kitharodes (Figure 17);[60] one reason may be that their expertise did not encompass both words and music. It would be invaluable to know why a harp player and a double-pipe player were paired as grave goods. Here is another pattern/combination that occurs elsewhere in Bronze Age representations—we noted it on the Haghia Triada sarcophagus, for instance—and it is attested in Homer.[61] By the Archaic period the lyre and double-pipe were established as the two fundamental instruments in Greek culture.[62] The combination in the Keros burial was probably motivated by various factors. Were the figures primarily funerary, lamenting the dead? Do they indicate the profession of the dead? Does the presence of a flute player imply that the practice of recitation accompanied by a flautist already existed? We must await further evidence.

To conclude our thoughts about the harp players, it is worth returning to the Neolithic figures with which we began. To my knowledge, no male figure of Neolithic date has yet been found in the Cyclades. The closest male relative, rendered in marble with consummate delicacy and svelteness, came to light at Knossos on Crete and is dated to the Early Neolithic period, about 6500–5800 B.C.[63] If we survey the surviving Neolithic human figures in all materials, from all parts of Greece,[64] they fall into the three familiar categories, female, male, and schematic. The females, whether steatopygous or normally proportioned, predominate numerically. The males are normally proportioned, which indicates that amplitude was not a distinction, as in certain other cultures. Some males are rendered with particular emphasis on their procreative role, others are not. The schematic figures represent an alternate and parallel mode of expression that may be characterized as symbolic or conceptual, in contrast to the more naturalistic types.

As we concentrate our focus once again on the Cyclades, all of these considerations come into play as one attempts to put together a picture of the evolution from Neolithic to Cycladic representation, from the more descriptive to the more schematic. An enormous problem that lurks beneath the shell of form is the

Figure 18. Profile view of Figure 3 (photo: Sheldan Collins)

Figure 19. Detail of Figure 10 (photo: Sheldan Collins)

matter of meaning. How should the figures be understood? We are in no position to entertain even the possibility that marble representations were based upon or inspired by specific individuals. Guided by one of the fundamental quandaries in the interpretation of Greek art of the historical period, however, we can pose the question of whether the more naturalistic renderings—the harp player, for instance—depict mortals, deities, or personifications. In Greek vase painting, from its inception to its South Italian finale, an identification often depends on the inclusion of an attribute or inscription. If we compare the Metropolitan and Levy-White steatopygous ladies, we have no difficulty noting a generic similarity between them. Covering each of her upper arms, however, the Levy-White example has an oval "pad" articulated with short horizontal marks in low relief at top and bottom, left and right (Figure 18).[65] Although we do not, unfortunately, know its meaning, this is an attribute that makes her specific. The Levy-White "elders" with the children on their backs (Figure 19) present an even more pronounced case of figures that are specifically characterized but impossible for us to interpret.

With the large number of female statuettes of the Early Cycladic period, the question of meaning becomes even more acute because of the simplified forms. The mere quantity may indicate that the question is less important; the role of the figures may have become essentially symbolic. One avenue of investigation that promises to be helpful to this area of inquiry concerns the polychrome articulation.[66] The Metropolitan Museum's harp player introduced the detail of paint ghosts. Other works preserve significant amounts of pigment that not only articulate the head and body but also resemble tattoos. Assisted by new analytical techniques and equipment, current research devoted to features no longer visible to the naked eye may modify our notions of how these objects originally looked and, therefore, what they may have meant.

Our discussion above of mathematical calculation in Cycladic and Geometric art linked two periods that are not normally associated. It seems to me, however, that in yet other respects insights gained for the one might also prove enlightening for the other. Heretofore, both periods were viewed by scholars very much as the tentative precursors of significant developments. Because of their very early date and "modern" look, Cycladic art has tended to be judged more favorably.

Geometric art is often still regarded as primitive, childlike, inept. Until new evidence proves otherwise, the early sculpture of the Cyclades is more accurately understood as the fundamentally symbolic and conceptual maturation of traditions beginning in the Neolithic period. Similarly, I suggest that the Geometric period be viewed as a time of thoroughgoing reorientation and renewal, in which the potency of survivals from the Bronze Age should not be underestimated. The most far-reaching achievements of these three centuries were the establishment of the polis and the Panhellenic sanctuaries, as well as the formation of the Greek alphabet. In order to bring our understanding of Geometric art into line with the larger picture of the period, it is worth focusing on such features as the technical excellence evident in pottery and bronze working, the primacy of order, connection, and hierarchy of complexity in the allotment of decoration to an object, the consistent emphasis on the clear and distinct rendering of every part within its context—whether it is a goat or a shroud in a mourning scene or one unit of a complex meander ornament. I should like to suggest that the supreme achievement of this art, and of this period as a whole, was to forge a new order, a new series of coordinates—political, social, cultural, religious, economic, artistic. The ingredients, as we are beginning to see, were an extraordinarily complex combination of survivals and innovations introduced by new populations and Eastern influences.[67] What we may glean from the artistic creations of the Early Cycladic period is the formulation of a style that, I propose, may be comparable to the Geometric in being rational, symbolic, deceptively simple, and powerfully direct in its vocabulary.

As more and more material remains come to light from the preliterate phases of Greek culture, the more acutely conscious one becomes of the lack of writing to record and transmit the words and the thinking that are so manifestly implicit in so many objects. Given the anthropocentrism of Greek art from the very beginning, the silence of illiteracy is resounding. The Levy-White "elders" with children occur in a group with a steatopygous female; without evidence to the contrary, we should assume that the combination of two aspects of childbearing was deliberate and that special importance may have been ascribed to the elders, perhaps by virtue of the memory that they carried. Again, the Levy-White steatopygous lady embodied fertility, but her attributes also indicate a special status. Whether the Cycladic harp players were singing or reciting, the imminence of words is even greater. And in the female statuettes the calculations underlying their design, as well as the beliefs governing their use, are noticeably inaccessible to us. For the Geometric period, the loss of words is just as critical, even though the amount of material evidence is greater and more varied. With the first inscriptions of about 700 B.C. and the works of Homer, Hesiod, and their anonymous contemporaries, we finally begin to acquire the tools for communication upon which we are so culturally dependent. Even without them, however, it is eminently worth directing our attention to the first surviving artistic manifestations in the Greek world, remote though they may be. To elucidate them across a distance of several millennia is as challenging and rewarding as sailing the Aegean Sea and fixing upon the stars in the night sky.

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NOTES

1. Mervyn R. Popham et al., *Lefkandi* I (London, 1979) and following.

2. See, for example, Vassos Karageorghis, *Cyprus in the 11th Century* (Nicosia, 1994).

3. A representative collection of recent studies appears in Jane B. Carter and Sarah P. Morris, *The Ages of Homer* (Austin, 1995).

4. *American Journal of Archaeology* 55 (1951) pp. 121–133.

5. George A. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture in Greece* (Athens, 1996) pp. 85–87; see also Jack L. Davis, "The Islands of the Aegean," *American Journal of Archaeology* 96 (1992) pp. 702–704.

6. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 319; John D. Evans and Colin Renfrew, *Excavations at Saliagos* (British School of Archaeology at Athens, Sup. Vol. 5, 1968) pp. 62–63.

7. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, pp. 85, 168.

8. Ibid., pp. 320–321.

9. See also Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art in North American Collections* (Seattle, 1987) p. 125.

10. Jürgen Thimme and Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Art and Culture of the Cyclades* (Chicago, 1977) p. 419.

11. Weinberg, "Neolithic Figurines," p.128, note 78; Christian Zervos, *L'Art des Cyclades* (Paris, 1957) p. 68; Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 318.

12. Thimme and Getz-Preziosi, *Art and Culture*, p. 419.

13. Dietrich von Bothmer, *Glories of the Past* (New York, 1990) p. 6.

14. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 318.

15. Ibid., p. 315; Weinberg, "Neolithic Figurines," pp. 122–123.

16. John E. Coleman, *Kephala* (Princeton, 1977) pp. 100–102.

17. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, pp. 156–157; Davis, "Islands of the Aegean," p. 703.

18. See esp. Olaf Höckmann, "Zu Formenschatz und Ursprung der schematischen Kykladenplastik," *Berliner Jahrbuch für Vor- und Frühgeschichte* 8 (1968) pp. 45–75.

19. Evans and Renfrew, *Saliagos*, pp. 63–64.

20. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, pp. 191–197.

21. See, for example, Davis, "Islands of the Aegean," pp. 728, 734, 739–740, 741.

22. For one of many accounts, see P. Getz-Preziosi, *Early Cycladic Art in North American Private Collections* (Richmond, 1987) pp. 17–18.

23. See Thimme and Getz-Preziosi, *Art and Culture*, pp. 185–191.

24. In the archaeological literature, this detail is described as both a duck's head and a swan's head. I opt for the former, as there is evidence for the existence of ducks and geese in Neolithic Greece (Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 101).

25. Thimme and Getz-Preziosi, *Art and Culture*, p. 495; see also Pat Getz-Preziosi, "The Male Figure in Early Cycladic Sculpture," *MMJ* 15 (1980), esp. pp. 14–15.

26. Thimme and Getz-Preziosi, *Art and Culture*, p. 468.

27. Pat Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades* (Ann Arbor, 1987) pp. 9–23.

28. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, pp. 293–315, 322–323.

29. "This art has a comfortable self-imposed limit, partly technical, partly illustrating the appeal of standard forms in antique religions, where tradition and security are mutually reinforcing. [The idols] are more than dolls and probably less than sacrosanct images," E. Vermeule, *Greece in the Bronze Age* (Chicago, 1964) p. 52.

30. Von Bothmer, *Glories*, pp. 13–15.

31. It is interesting to compare the pose of a carved pebble from Thessaly: Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 311.

32. Von Bothmer, *Glories*, p. 16. Colin Renfrew, *The Cycladic Spirit* (New York, 1991) p. 115, questions the work's authenticity. The presence of ancient pigment, observed by Elizabeth Hendrix, should help to allay his concerns.

33. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 307.

34. Ibid., p. 314; Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, p. 22.

35. For a summary discussion, see Davis, "Islands of the Aegean," pp. 706–708.

36. For a recent summary, see Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, pp. 36–47.

37. The basic work on Geometric pottery remains Nicolas Coldstream, *Greek Geometric Pottery* (London, 1968). An excellent recent introduction to the Geometric period is Susan Langdon, *From Pasture to Polis* (Columbia, 1993).

38. In general terms, a harp is characterized by its approximately triangular shape, one side of which is taken by the soundbox. The lyre has a soundbox from which arise two arms joined by a crossbar. The kithara is a type of lyre typically used in performance; it is large in size and has a quadrilateral soundbox.

39. Getz-Preziosi, "Male Figure," pp. 7–25; Getz-Preziosi, *North American Collections*, pp. 261–262.

40. Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, p.41.

41. Von Bothmer, *Glories*, pp. 20–22; Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, p. 247.

42. Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, p. 249.

43. Ibid.

44. See esp. *Odyssey*, book 8 (Demodokos); book 1, ll. 154, 337ff., book 22, ll. 330ff. (Phemios); books 9–12 (Odysseus, evidently without instrumental accompaniment); *Iliad*, book 9, ll. 189ff. (Achilles).

45. Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance* (Cambridge, 1996) p. 71.

46. Ibid., pp. 71–73.

47. For useful summaries, see Max Wegner, "Musik und Tanz," *Archaeologia Homerica* (Göttingen, 1968) pp. 2–18; Martha Maas and Jane M. Snyder, *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece* (New Haven, 1989) pp. 2–11.

48. The basic article is N. Platon, "Minoike Lyra," in *Charisterion eis A.K. Orlandon* (Athens, 1966) III, pp. 208–232.

49. Maas and Snyder, *Stringed Instruments*, p. 2.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., p. 9.

52. Ibid., pp. 7–8.

53. Mabel L. Lang, *The Palace of Nestor at Pylos* (Princeton, 1969) II, pp. 79–80.

54. For the longevity of the duck's-head finial, see also Getz-Preziosi, *North American Collections*, pp. 261–262.

55. Barry B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge, 1991) pp. 161–162.

56. In this connection it is important to note the female seated on an impressive high-backed chair; L. Marangou, *Cycladic Culture: Naxos in the 3rd Millennium* (Athens, 1990) pp. 48–51.

57. Informative, readable introductions to this subject are provided by Gregory Nagy, *Pindar's Homer* (Baltimore, 1990), and *Poetry as Performance* (Cambridge, 1996).

58. See, for instance, Wegner, "Musik und Tanz," pp. 2–18.

59. Getz-Preziosi, "The Male Figure," pp. 31–32.

60. Jenifer Neils, *Goddess and Polis* (Hanover, 1992) pp. 58, 60, and passim. See also Nagy, *Pindar's Homer*, p. 104.

61. *Iliad*, book 18, l. 495.

62. See H. Alan Shapiro in Neils, *Goddess and Polis*, pp. 52–75.

63. Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, p. 322.

64. In addition to Papathanassopoulos, *Neolithic Culture*, see esp.

Machteld J. Mellink and Jan Filip, *Frühe Stufen der Kunst* (Berlin, 1974), and Kostas Gallis and Laia Orphanidis, *Figurines of Neolithic Thessaly* (Athens, 1996).

65. The marks may be counterparts in low relief of the painted "tattoos" occurring on the later Cycladic figures. The "pad" itself, however, is the most interesting feature.

66. Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades*, pp. 53–54; Pat G. Preziosi and Saul S. Weinberg, "Evidence for Painted Details in Early Cycladic Sculpture," *Antike Kunst* 13 (1970) pp. 4–16; Elizabeth Hendrix, "Painted Ladies of the Early Bronze Age," *MMAB* Winter 1997–98, pp. 4–15.

67. Though somewhat outdated, useful discussions can be found in *The Cambridge Ancient History* II, 2 (1975), esp. Geoffrey S. Kirk, "The Homeric Poems as History," pp. 833–841 and *The Cambridge Ancient History* III, 1 (1982), esp. Nicholas G. L. Hammond, "The Peloponnese," pp. 738–744.